MONATLICHER INFORMATIONSBRIEF ÜBER EVANGELISATION

A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

Number 1
January 1958

The Rev. G. van Veldhuizen is a minister of the Netherland Reformed Church with wide experience in parish churches in Holland. Formally a minister in one of the wealthiest parishes of Rotterdam he is now carrying on the work described below in Crooswijk, one of the poorest parishes of the city. Mr. van Veldhuizen is the author of several novels and books about his work.

MODERN EVANGELISTICAL METHODS IN AN OLD PARISH OF ROTTERDAM

We are working in an old parish par excellence. Recent investigations seem to show that "Crooswijk" is the cradle of Rotterdam, a birth-place consisting, about 1250, of a toll-gate, a strong-hold and a few cottages. Nothing of these good old days can be found anymore. The newer Crooswijk dates from 1860 when builders here laid out several new streets for the immigrants from the little villages who liked to work and live in the big town, but who could not find any romm in the city itself. As a result of the great devastation of Rotterdam by German bombers on May 14th, 1940 (when the parishes in the centre of the town were burned down) Crooswijk, within some hours, became the oldest parish of Rotterdam for the second time. In addition, many inhabitants of the city parishes, once born and bred in Crooswijk, returned and by doing so reinforced its character as an old parish. In this manner Crooswijk has kept very strong groupings until today: the groups of the big families (at least three generations: parents, children and grandchildren), the street-corner societies, the groups of the same interests (boxing, pigeon fanciers etc.), the gangs and the clans, the societies of the aged. Thanks to those groupings there is a somewhat snug atmosphere at Crooswijk, notwithstanding the fact that about 15,000 people - unskilled, unorganised people, dockers, factory-hands - live there in about 1,000 houses.

Our methods are based upon this general background, and this gives us an advantage over the workers of the church in other, more differentiated parishes, and especially the heterogeneous newer parishes. Evangelistic work finds its field in the existing groups, and in the total group-feeling of Crooswijk as such - a group-feeling developed by common action in the years around 1930 with strikes and communistic revolts, and again during the great war with a feverish blackmarket. It is a field prepared in a certain manner to receive the good seed, because Crooswijk has some vague memories of older attempts at evangelisation: in the nineties by Heldring, during the first world war

by Scholten, and in the thirties by van Kooten, and three "Hervormde" ministers who worked here in the manner of their times. Those workers have left one or two remnants: in the first place a little parish house containing three rooms, and then a kind of "rumour" of the Gospel. Never has the Gospel been totally lost at Crooswijk; many have remained vagely conscious of the hidden presence of God. It is this "rumour", this dim consciousness, that gives us the first point of contact with people in speaking about matters of faith. We are in the same position as the spies at Jericho. They also found a woman, who knew about the living God by hear-say. And we believe that everywhere this "rumour" is working and gives the point of contact every evangelist is looking for. In working among the children of the Prodigal Son, one cannot speak in the terms of the church about the feelings of the Father. They do not have any knowledge of the Father, who is far away. But perhaps once upon an evening their own father has described some memories of the house where once he lived. There we start with our conversations and our preaching. The people of Crooswijk do not like to hear evangelists like Billy Graham, because they do not understand them. Neither do they know the problems of the children of the Prodigal Son. There is one method of speaking to the people who still on occasion go to church, even if only when they are baptised, when they marry, and when they have died. But there is another method to be used when speaking to the fourth man: the post-Christian, post-civic, post-personal man who has no connections with the Gospel except through a "rumour" of it.

We therefore purposely look for contact with existing groups, rather then attempt to create groups. In some cases - especially with children from 6-9 years - the formation of groups by our effort may yield results, but mostly such groups are too artificial to tie their members really together. On the other hand, the existing groups are firm, even for instance when they are split up by a continuous struggle between those who govern them and the rebel-leaders in their own rank (perhaps because people today get too few chances to kick up a row, since strikes are not fashionable any longer??). It is our purpose really to get to know the groups: to make their manners and norms our own; to get to know the most important data; to understand their vocabulary thoroughly. In the course of years we have found out that "gezelligheid" - that queer Rotterdam word for cosiness, beauty, peace, the realisation of being bound by norms, eirènè, sjaloom - gives a group its essential value. We have also discovered that most groups are lacking in this "gezelligheid", even when the above mentioned quarrel is valued positively!

By living in those groups, in the closest personal communication with Christ and by offering ourselves in services we have seen this "gezelligheid" increase, and their members learn to accept Christ as a centre of group and of personal life. Thus we do not work by creating new church groups alongside the existing groups. If we did so a man would never feel at home at the same time in his own groups and in the Christian group. He would almost live a split life; he would struggle again and again to change; and at last he would fall into a "sociosis", that kind of neurosis which is the result of the collision in a man's heart of his loyalties to two communities.

What we are doing is to preach Christ as the Lord of the existing old groups, while we subject ourselves to Him. It then results that the group is more willing to accept Him. One example will help to illustrate the point. Our boxing club considered it God's protecting interference when a fortnight before a match one of the posts broke. They said: "You see, God has a hand in it! Such a thing would not happen at a church-match. God gives us time to restore things!" God, in His loving, redeeming work retook His central

place in their whole life - not only in their spare time, not only in their culture, but throughout.

How do we get contact with the existing groups? In the first place by being present and available, by creating different opportunities - parish houses, sport grounds etc. -, by appointing skilled youth leaders, social labourers and other young men and women to work in various ways. In the second place we create the above mentioned groups of young children, especially by making use of longer camp periods. In the third place we work with those children in methods of "comprehensive approach". And in the fourth place we wait till existing groups come to us and see for themselves. One could say that we prepare the bee-hives, empty and orderly, "gezellig", and that then we wait until the swarms look for their own new homes.

The "comprehensive approach" means too that we reject superficial contacts which do not promise deeper involvements. We resent the informal at-home-work, because there are too many people around, and it is too impersonal. So we look for contacts with the parents, the families, and the neighbours of the children. This means that we must have a permanent house to house visitation, and in fact at Crooswijk about 5,000 visitations are made by the ten staff leaders every year. At the same time the "comprehensive approach" means to us that the whole milieu of the child has to be reached. We have to aid people in their material, bodily, psychial, social and spiritual levels. We believe that the church fails when it sets bounds to its evangelistic attempts. "The extravagant stress on verbal communication, on preaching and sermonizing, is a degeneration of the Reformers' rediscovery of the prophetic character and quality of the Word of God" (Kraemer). It is not enough for the church merely to preach all day, whether within its buildings or in the open air. Preaching is very often merely an intellectual approach, especially for people who can hardly read and who cannot understand the mysterious language of the church. There are many divergences on this matter among the several reformed denominations. As for us, we believe that it is more important to live with people and to reach them in the whole range of their being, than to work only with words, with ideas, with abstractions. We try to make them live with Christ, in the way of St. Paul: "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection" - a knowing by heart, not only intellectually.

We believe that the Incarnation means that the church must never be concerned only for "the soul". If the church had had the right understanding of this during the 19th century, Crooswijk would not have been built in such a lamentable way. It is a question whether, in this case, the proletariat would have come into being. The proletariat is a child of a split-up church which cared more for doctrines than for the bodies of the people and their living contact with Christ, even though the church may have put the name of Christ in the centre of its words. At present a church awakened out of a long and deep dream, knows that it must serve: on Sundays and on week-days, in the church buildings, in the factories, and in the slums.

The "comprehensive approach" involves work on several levels. We start all of the groupings - the natural and the artificial ones - with play. It may be playing with toys for the kiddies or with cards for the teenagers and elder ones. We continue with sports which demand team work and discipline - far too often a great problem for children who have never learned to be together in the world. In the third place we have our development groups with their talks and conversations, with hand-work, ballet, music etc. At last we have our courses for more serious studies.

In this manner we are able to serve the whole child. This does not mean, however, that we withhold a spoken witness until the child has grown up. From the start we make our witness, building upon the "rumour" about God. This method reveals many failings in the educational system for the infant classes and the preliminary schools. The usual type of school has been instituted for children who are not aware of the dark things of life and death: of coition, birth and death. But the children of the slums are living near to those secrets! They have a knowledge of things which many grown-ups have never heard of. Together with the head-masters of some schools we are looking for new methods in education lest the child grow up in a false world.

Through this work with groups of children and through our visitations we come into comtact with the natural groupings of the community. In 1948 the first gangs came to our buildings and from that time their number has increased. Today we receive every week about 3,000 people in our five homes. Kiddies and aged people, streetcorner societies, trade unions, boxing and sporting clubs, bands etc., all come. It has been very useful to wait. We refrain from trying to Christianize those visitors after our own manner. We wait for the time when they come and ask us to render an account of the faith that is in us. We believe that the church must wait until this question is asked. The church should not force its company on others. Moreover, unless a conversation on this subject is held in an atmosphere of confidence, it will only be an intellectual discussion, without results.

Finally, we have discovered that these groups are finding their way to a very new phenomenon. This is the para-parish, with its own divine services. New forms of worship appear: preaching is a specimen of a conference, never a remonstrance, and always a story. The fellowship is near to the agape of the first centuries, with a deep understanding of one another and a permanent demonstration of love of God and of one's neighbour.